

independent, self assured individuals. Perhaps this is not so much a failing of the model as it is due to the powerfully dependent personas of the women. Each is portrayed essentially as victim. Although the particular life circumstances of each differs—in common—Margaret, Mem, and Celie live basically loveless lives; they're brutalized and neglected by their husbands, they are exploited by their environments, and they are long sufferers.

The analytical model presented in the paper, while holding out promise as an additional eclectic tool for better understanding the coping strategies of the three women in the subject works, it does not inform us much about the extent to which Margaret, Mem, and Celie seek independence, the essence of surviving whole, in their employment of coping strategies. This point notwithstanding, the paper makes an important contribution in the first instance to understanding the multifarious coping dimensions of the black women in Alice Walker's two novels. In the second instance, the paper brings us closer to the world of black women.

—Otis L. Scott

Critique

An examination of the coping strategies of vulnerable and victimized women characters in Alice Walker's fiction does suggest possibilities for coping with racial oppression. The most oppressed woman in Walker's fiction, however, is not Mem, Margaret, or Celie, but Sofia, the wife of Harpo, Celie's stepson in *The Color Purple*. Certainly Sofia is one of those "women who are cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness." But she is not brutalized by her husband. Her tormentors are much more powerful and, therefore, much more frightening.

When Sofia is first introduced, she is nobody's victim. Big, pregnant, and sassy, she seems not to have a care in the world. "I ain't in no trouble. Big though."¹ Once she and Harpo are married—after the baby is born—Sofia refuses to let him beat her. She tells Celie:

All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girlchild ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (46)

In fact, it is Sofia, not Shug Avery, who first encourages Celie to fight Albert. "You ought to bash Mr. _____ head open, she [Sofia] say. Think bout heaven later" (47). When she tires of fighting Harpo, the independent Sofia simply leaves.

But later she encounters a force much more brutal and powerful than Harpo or her male relatives. She comes face to face with white justice in the form of the mayor and his wife. When the mayor's wife asks the very clean Sofia if she would like to be her maid, Sofia's response is a

matter-of-fact “hell no” (86). And when the mayor slaps her, Sofia, of course, slaps him back, just as she would Harpo. But, unlike Harpo, the mayor has the law on his side—“The polices come, start slinging the children off the mayor, bang they heads together. Sofia really start to fight. They drag her to the ground” (86).

Sofia is taken to the jail, more dead than alive, and there the brutality intensifies.

They put Sofia to work in the prison laundry. All day long from five to eight she washing clothes. Dirty convict uniforms, nasty sheets and blankets piled way over her head. Us see her twice a month for half a hour. Her face yellow and sickly, her fingers look like fatty sausage.

Everything nasty here, she say, even the air. Food bad enough to kill you with it. Roaches here, mice, flies, lice and even a snake or two. If you say anything they strip you, make you sleep on a cement floor without a light. (88)

It is at this point in her life that Sofia, who achieved self-determination and independence at an early age, needs coping strategies. And, ironically, she chooses to mimic Celie.

How you manage? us ast. Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say. (88)

Sofia has evaluated the situation, which is oppressive and even life-threatening, considered the available options—none—and recognized that she has *no* control over her life. She has taken the only action possible under the circumstances; she has transformed herself into a passive victim.

As Sofia's relatives recognize, however, she can not survive indefinitely using this desperate coping strategy. She is already going insane and will soon die. Her circumstances require a communal effort and some devious tactics. Because Squeak, Harpo's new woman, is the niece of the warden, she becomes the emissary. But she is not to beg for mercy; instead she is told to pretend that Sofia is enjoying her confinement.

Tell him you just think justice ought to be done, yourself. But make sure he know you living with Sofia husband, say Shug. Make sure you git in the part bout being happy where she at, worse thing could happen to her is to be some white lady maid. (93)

The tactics work. Sofia is released into the custody of the mayor's wife. Although she is not really free, Sofia is no longer brutalized, and she survives.

With the portrayal of Sofia, Alice Walker seems to be demonstrating that racist institutions are much more brutal and overpowering than are individual black men. Sofia is able to assume responsibility for success in her fight against the black men in her family. But it takes the combined efforts of friends, relatives, and even natural enemies (Harpo and Squeak) to rescue her from white justice.

—Mary F. Sisney

Note

¹Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), p. 38. Subsequent passages cited parenthetically in the text.